Note: The following resolution, approved by General Synod 25 in Atlanta, should not be considered "final" until the minutes of the General Synod have been reviewed and approved by the Executive Council in October.

In Support of Equal Marriage Rights for All

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 1 John 4:7

"Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Mark 10:9

Background

Ideas about marriage have shifted and changed dramatically throughout human history, and such change continues even today. At different points marriage has been defined in response to economic realities, by the primacy of procreation and by societal understandings of the role of men and women. In the Gospel we find ground for a definition of marriage and family relationships based on affirmation of the full humanity of each partner, lived out in mutual care and respect for one another. Scripture itself, along with the global human experience, offers many different views of family and how family is to be defined. This unfolding revelation and understanding needs to be weighed carefully by people of faith considering the issue of equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender. Jesus radically challenged his traditional cultural roles and concepts of family life. Jesus boldly declared members of the household/family of God to be whoever hears and follows the will of God.

Civil/legal marriage carries with it significant access to institutional support, rights and benefits. There are more than 1,400 such rights and benefits in the federal statutes alone. Efforts to ban civil marriage to couples based on gender denies them and their children access to these rights and benefits, and thus, undermines the civil liberties of these couples, putting them and their children at risk.

Throughout its history, the United Church of Christ has been at the forefront in the struggle for justice and equality. For more than 30 years, the General Synod of the UCC has adopted resolutions affirming lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons, consistently calling for an end to discrimination, equal protection under the law, deploring LGBT hate crimes and violence, supporting LGBT relationships and families, celebrating the gifts of LGBT persons for ministry and encouraging all settings of the church to be open and affirming of LGBT persons, welcoming them and encouraging their participation in every aspect of the mission and ministry of the church.

Theological and Biblical Foundations

The message of the Gospel is the lens through which the whole of scripture is to be interpreted. Love and compassion, justice and peace are at the very core of the life and ministry of Jesus. It is a message that always bends toward inclusion. The biblical story recounts the ways in which inclusion and welcome to God's community is ever-expanding – from the story of Abraham and Sarah, to the inclusive ministry of Jesus, to the baptism of Cornelius, to the missionary journeys of Paul throughout the Greco-Roman world. The liberating work of the Spirit as witnessed in the activities of Jesus' ministry has been to address the situations and structures of exclusion, injustice and oppression that diminish God's people and keep them from realizing the full gift of human personhood in the context of human communion.

The biblical call to justice and compassion (to love one's neighbor as one's self) provides the mandate for marriage equality. Justice as right relationship seeks both personal and communal well being. It is embodied in interpersonal relationships and institutional structures, including marriage. Justice seeks to eliminate marginalization for reasons of race, gender, sexual orientation or economic status.

The language of covenant is central to the message of scripture concerning relationships and community. Both in the message of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus, covenant relationships are important, taken seriously by God and are to be taken seriously by God's people. The overriding message of the Gospel is that God calls God's people to live fully the gift of love in responsible, faithful, just, committed, covenantal relationships of trust that recognize and respect the image of God in all people. These Gospel values are at the core of the covenantal relationship that we call marriage.

It is essential to note that the Gospel values of covenant do not come from the practices of marriage, which change and evolve throughout the history of the biblical story. Indeed, it is not possible to rely exclusively on scripture for understanding marriage today. For example, biblical texts that encourage celibacy, forbid divorce, or require women to be subservient to their husbands are not considered to be authoritative because they are primarily expressions of the cultural norms of the ancient Middle East. At the same time, there are also many biblical models for blessed relationships beyond one man and one woman. Indeed, scripture neither commends a single marriage model nor commands all to marry, but rather calls for love and justice in all relationships.

We recognize and affirm that the covenantal values that are essential to the Gospel are central to how we understand marriage in this time. We also recognize and affirm that all humans are made in the image and likeness of God, including people of all sexual orientations, and God has bestowed upon each one the gift of human sexuality. Further, we recognize and affirm that, as created in God's image and gifted by God with human sexuality, all people have the right to lead lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent and pleasure.

Is God still speaking about marriage? The overwhelming testimonies of countless couples, regardless of gender, throughout the United Church of Christ, and beyond, say, "Yes, God is still speaking." Couples who have chosen to exchange covenantal vows attest to the blessing of God's abundance and life-giving power in their relationships. Through their committed relationships, many throughout the church – parents, siblings, children, friends and others – have witnessed the liberation of the gifts of God for service in the world.

Therefore, theologically and biblically, there is neither justification for denying any couple, regardless of gender, the blessings of the church nor for denying equal protection under the law in the granting of a civil marriage license, recognized and respected by all civil entities.

The Resolution

WHEREAS the Bible affirms and celebrates human expressions of love and partnership, calling us to live out fully that gift of God in responsible, faithful, committed relationships that recognize and respect the image of God in all people; and

WHEREAS the life and example of Jesus of Nazareth provides a model of radically inclusive love and abundant welcome for all; and

WHEREAS we proclaim ourselves to be listening to the voice of a Still Speaking God at that at all times in human history there is always yet more light and truth to break forth from God's holy word; and

WHEREAS many UCC pastors and congregations have held commitment services for gay and lesbian couples for some time, consistent with the call to loving, long-term committed relationships and to nurture family life; and

WHEREAS recognition of marriage carries with it significant access to institutional support, rights and benefits; and

WHEREAS children of families headed by same-gender couples should receive all legal rights and protections; and

WHEREAS legislation to ban recognition of same-gender marriages further undermine the civil liberties of gay and lesbian couples and contributes to a climate of misunderstanding and polarization, increasing hostility against gays and lesbians; and

WHEREAS a Constitutional Amendment has been introduced to this Congress to limit marriage to "only the union of a man and a woman"; and

WHEREAS equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender is an issue deserving of serious, faithful discussion by people of faith, taking into consideration the long,

complex history of marriage and family life, layered as it is with cultural practices, economic realities, political dynamics, religious history and biblical interpretation;

AND

WHEREAS the Tenth General Synod pronounced that all person are entitled to full civil liberties and equal protection under the law without discrimination related to sexual preference; and

WHEREAS the Eleventh General Synod urged that States should legislatively recognize that traditional marriage is not the only stable living unit entitled to legal protection; and

WHEREAS the Nineteenth General Synod called on the church for greater leadership to end discrimination against gays and lesbians; and

WHEREAS the Executive Council of the United Church of Christ in April, 2004 called the church to action and dialogue on marriage;

THEREFORE LET IT BE RESOLVED, that the Twenty-fifth General Synod of the United Church of Christ affirms equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender and declares that the government should not interfere with couples regardless of gender who choose to marry and share fully and equally in the rights, responsibilities and commitment of legally recognized marriage; and

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Twenty-fifth General Synod of the United Church of Christ affirms equal access to the basic rights, institutional protections and quality of life conferred by the recognition of marriage; and

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Twenty-fifth General Synod calls for an end to rhetoric that fuels hostility, misunderstanding, fear and hatred expressed toward gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons; and

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Officers of the United Church of Christ are called upon to communicate this resolution to local, state and national legislators, urging them to support equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender.

In recognition that these resolutions may not reflect the views or current understanding of all bodies, and acknowledging the pain and struggle their passage will engender within the gathered church, the General Synod encourages the following:

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Twenty -fifth General Synod calls upon all settings of the United Church of Christ to engage in serious, respectful, and prayerful discussion of the covenantal relationship of marriage and equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender, using the “God is still speaking, about Marriage” study and discussion guide produced by Wider Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ (available online at UCC.org); and

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Twenty-fifth General Synod calls upon congregations, after prayerful biblical, theological, and historical study, to consider adopting Wedding Policies that do not discriminate against couples based on gender; and

LET IT BE FINALLY RESOLVED, that the Twenty-fifth General Synod urges the congregations and individuals of the United Church of Christ to prayerfully consider and support local, state and national legislation to grant equal marriage rights to couples regardless of gender, and to work against legislation, including constitutional amendments, which denies civil marriage rights to couples based on gender.

Funding for the implementation of this Resolution will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.